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RAVEL

MA MÈRE L'OYE (Mother Goose)

DEBUSSY

NOCTURNES

ERNEST ANSERMET conducting L'ORCHESTRE DE LA SUISSE ROMANDE

During the same year in which he orchestrated his *Valses nobles et sentimentales* for the ballet *Adélaïde ou le langage des fleurs*, Ravel transformed *Ma mère l'oye*, his little suite for piano, four hands, into another ballet. For the stage presentation, in addition to orchestrating the piano music, he devised a special introduction, *Danse du Rouet et scène*, arranging his material as five tableaux and an apotheosis.

The episodes of the earlier piano version are incorporated into a convenient variation of the Sleeping Beauty story. Princess Florine is discovered dancing in her garden, as her old nurse sits at the spinning-wheel (*Danse du rouet*). The princess falls against the spindle, as pre-ordained, pricks herself and faints. Courtiers and ladies-in-waiting surround her, then dance a ceremonious *Pavane de la Belle au bois dormant* as she is laid out on her couch. A fairy appears to guard the bewitched princess whose dreams take form on the stage.

Petit Poucet (Hop o' my Thumb), the woodcutter's child, and his six brothers wander through the woods. As set forth by Ravel, after the text of Charles Perrault's *Contes de ma mère l'oye*, Petit Poucet "believed he could easily find his way back by means of his bread crumbs which he had scattered as he passed along; but to his surprise he could not find a single crumb; the birds had come and eaten them up."

Laideronette, Impératrice des Pagodes (Little Ugly One, Empress of the Pagodas) is adapted from the seventeenth-century tale, *Le Serpentin Vert* (The Green Serpent), written by the Countess Marie Catherine d'Aulnoy, in imitation of Perrault. Formerly a beautiful princess, Laideronette has been deformed by the curse of a wicked witch and has secluded herself in a distant castle. She encounters a huge green serpent who divulges the fact that the same evil witch has condemned him to his present shape in place of his former handsome person. The ugly one and the serpent, destined for marriage in their restored forms, sail to the land of the Pagodas, small creatures with bodies made of crystal, porcelain, emeralds and diamonds. The score is fitted to the scene where Laideronette "undressed and entered her bath. Immediately the Pagodes and Pagodines began to sing and play on divers instruments. Some had theorbos, or lutes, made of walnut shells; others had viols made of almond shells; for of course the instruments had to be proportionate to their size."

Les Entretiens de la Belle et la Bête (Conversations of Beauty and the Beast) deals with the well-known story. Ravel cites the following lines from the version by Jeanne Marie Leprince de Beaumont:

"When I think how kind-hearted you are, you don't seem so ugly to me."

"Yes, truly, I have a kind heart. Still, I am a beast."

"There are many men more beastly than you."

"If I were witty, I should invent a fine compliment to thank you, but I am only a beast."

* * *

"Beauty, will you be my wife?"

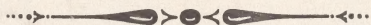
"No, Beast!"

"I die happy since I have had the pleasure of seeing you again."

"No, my dear Beast, you shall not die. You shall live to be my husband."

The Beast vanished, and she saw at her feet a prince more beautiful than Love, who thanked her for breaking his enchantment.

As her dreams come to an end, Florine is alone in her garden. Prince Charming awakens her with a kiss and the characters of the story assemble in the supernatural garden while the Good Fairy blesses the couple (*Le Jardin Féerique*).



Immediately after the first performance of the *Prelude à L'après midi d'un faune*, in 1894, Debussy conceived the idea of composing three Nocturnes for Violin and Orchestra which he intended dedicating to Eugène Ysaÿe, the great Belgian violinist. The original scheme was not ambitious. Debussy thought of scoring the first movement for strings alone, the second for three flutes, four horns, three trumpets, and two harps, and the third for a combination of both these forces. This idea did not come to fruition, and in 1898 he completed the *Nocturnes* for full orchestra and female chorus, the trombones being reserved for the second, and the chorus for the third. The complete work was not performed until 1901, and was an immediate success. Audiences had been prepared for the new music by *L'après-midi* and by the first two of the *Nocturnes* which had been played the previous year. The composition of this orchestral work ran concurrently with that of *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Music at that time was moving to the peak of a revolution.

Two things impelled Debussy's thought. The first was an admiration for Mussorgsky, a composer practically unknown in France at that time; the second was Impressionism, an aesthetic difficulty to apply in its fullest sense to music. Debussy was drawn to beautiful sounds for their own sake and not to classical device and other points of musical scholarship. His principles were directly opposed to those of Franck and d'Indy, although he was not in any way hostile to them; there are several instances of his admiration for certain aspects of that Franckist aesthetic against which he strenuously set his face. It would appear that he deliberately flew in the face of certain instincts in order to save music from repeating itself.

The term Impressionism in music is applied to that aesthetic whose technique results in vague sensuous sounds which give an impression of something or other without in any way clearly delineating it. The first and

third of the *Nocturnes* may be so described, but not the second, which is altogether too clear-cut and suggestive of something definite and tangible. "Nuages", as the word implies, is cloudy and shadowy. Debussy did not visualize in these pieces the romantic and lyrical night picture of Chopin, and the movement does not evoke any romantic or pictorial images. It may be that the semi-quaver figure on the English Horn was suggested by the hooting of a tug on the Seine.

"Fêtes" is a brilliant *tour de force* whose intention is equally distinguishable, and much more pointed. Again, it may be that Debussy visualized this in terms of "the vibrating, dancing rhythm of the atmosphere with sudden flashes of light" and the middle section as "a dazzling, fantastic vision". One may be forgiven for seeing it in the light of something much more earthy. It is indeed a Fête. The first and third sections are flashing and exhilarating, but the muted trumpets, which, approaching from afar and along an exciting crescendo, arrive on the scene at the moment the Fête recommences, seem to belong to some earthy Bacchanlian festivity, and mark the climax of a procession. This is only fanciful, of course, and with music of this nature, the individual must see for himself. Here is no Impressionism.

"Sirenes" is self-explanatory. The sea is glistening in the moonlight; the Sirens sit on their rocks, ready to lure unsuspecting ships and mariners to their doom. The picture of the sea is impressionistic but the Sirens are tangible. One recognises them in the insidious character of their music which insinuates itself into the general picture painted by the wonderfully pointed tints of the orchestra. Here Debussy shows his marvellous ingenuity and sensitivity which in combination, contrive to present a scene of beautiful proportions and color. The music is alive in its Impressionistic technique. The waves sparkle and splash against the rocks in the starlight. This is pure musical poetry.

Debussy has been blamed for beginning and ending with a slow movement, as if no symphonic work could be satisfactory unless sandwiching its slow and introspective movement between violent ones. Debussy indicated that such a theory was a fallacy and that a work which ends quietly after weaving its spell can be equally effective as one with a traditional bang and flourish. Its originality is proclaimed on every page.

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RAVEL: MA MÈRE L'OYE

(Mother Goose Suite)

1. Prélude et Danse du Rouet
2. Pavane de la Belle au bois dormant
3. Petit Poucet
4. L'aidronnette, Impératrice des Pagodes
5. Les entretiens de la Belle et de la Bête
6. Le jardin féerique

ERNEST ANSERMET

conducting

L'ORCHESTRE DE LA SUISSE
ROMANDE

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TIME TVZ

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DEBUSSY: NOCTURNES

1. Nuages
 2. Fêtes
 3. Sirènes (with Female Chorus)
- ERNEST ANSERMET**
conducting
L'ORCHESTRE DE LA SUISSE
ROMANDE

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